



Bush's Choice on Funding the Troops

The funding bill Congress will deliver honors US troops and the will of the American people. Will Bush turn his back on the nation?

**By Robert Byrd and David Obey
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The time has come for President Bush to face reality and make some tough decisions about the future of America's involvement in Iraq. The president has two fundamental choices: He can demonstrate real leadership by reaching across party lines to establish common ground on a strategy for ending US involvement in Iraq's civil war, or he can continue to divide the country by clinging to his failed policy.

In the days ahead, Congress will send Mr. Bush legislation that provides funding for our troops and urgent priorities facing our nation. Our bill will supply vital resources for our soldiers in the field, and it will strengthen medical care for those returning from war and our veterans.

The president has claimed – falsely – that Congress is somehow delaying funding for our troops. In fact, we have moved forward with this emergency supplemental on a faster timetable than the previous requests passed by the Republican-controlled 109th Congress. The president will have this legislation on his desk before the end of the month. It will be his choice, then, whether to hold up these funds with a veto or to sign the bill into law.

The bill will not cut funds for our troops. Congress will provide nearly \$100 billion for our women and men in uniform. It will provide our troops with body armor and specialized armored vehicles, which the administration has failed to do. We will strengthen and improve healthcare for our troops and veterans, which the administration has not done. And Congress will craft a responsible strategy for the Iraqis to take control of their own nation. Congress will insist on greater accountability and responsibility both from the Bush administration and the Iraqi government.

Importantly, this legislation also establishes a framework for beginning the redeployment of our Armed Forces from Iraq to areas where they can more effectively confront the most serious threats facing our nation and the region. This redeployment will be paired with renewed efforts to train and equip Iraqi security forces and to build regional and international support for the Iraqi government.

The House and the Senate bills take different paths toward this goal; but each recognizes that the American people do not support an open-ended US military occupation in Iraq. They do not want our troops mired in Iraq's civil war. They do not want our presence in Iraq to serve as a catalyst for more violence, not only in Iraq but throughout the Middle East.

Congress has responded to the people, crafting a new direction that will provide the Iraqi government with the necessary motivation to pursue real political reconciliation.

The American people have sent a clear message to Washington: It is time to begin bringing our troops home from Iraq. If Bush vetoes this bill, he will turn his back on the clearly expressed wishes of the nation.

Last week, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates announced that our troops in Iraq and those troops set to deploy will have their tours extended to 15 months. This comes on top of the White House's announcement that they were rushing thousands of troops back to Iraq for extended tours of duty, without providing sufficient time for rest, recovery, and retraining.

Such plans, political posturing, and veto threats have placed the safety of our troops in unnecessary jeopardy. It is simply unconscionable that the White House is now attempting to blame Congress for the failure to successfully prosecute the war.

The president has said on many occasions that the US commitment to Iraq is not open-ended. Now is the time for him to show the nation that those were not hollow words.

The president has also declared his commitment to improve the lives of our veterans. If the president chooses to work with Congress – the people's representatives – we can reach a bipartisan solution that unites the country rather than divides it, while meeting the expectations and needs of the American people.

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